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## **Putting the ‘Cool’ in Coolie: *Disidentification, desire and dissent in the work of filmmaker Michelle Mohabeer***

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### **Abstract**

“It’s referencing back all of those Indian women that have come worked on the plantations and in the cane fields. It’s empowering them to a degree and yet the dance is South Asian...it evokes Bengali folk dance. It has an Indianness coded in it....And on the side of that shot is the Guyana flag which I’ve inverted as well which is a big thing because in not showing the flag as is, I’m gesturing to the question of sexuality. So there are many layers there...” (Mohabeer 2008)

Toronto-based filmmaker Michelle Mohabeer’s films offer a rare glimpse into the multiple layers of irony and resistance that define dissident Caribbean sexualities. Mohabeer offers what she terms an “oppositional aesthetics” (Ibid) to capture the disparate layers of politics, memory, and desire which shape dissident sexualities in postcolonial Guyana and the Caribbean diaspora. In this paper, I am interested in how the complex entanglements through which Caribbean sexualities are processed are expressed through avant garde art forms.

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## **Introduction**

Dominant narratives of Caribbean sexuality often revolve around the oppositions of nationalist movements that see queerness as non-existent or menacing to the heterosexist bourgeois goals of the nation (Atluri 2001; Kempadoo 2004). Conversely, the rhetoric of the “homophobic Caribbean” is frequently rooted in a neo-colonial paternalism which misses the often untranslatable way in which sexualities operate in non-Western contexts.

Throughout this work, I argue that avant garde art and aesthetics are used in Mohabeer’s films to trouble the idea of a universal “queer” identity, which often masks the deep ethnocentrism that defines mainstream Western understandings of desire. At the same time, I use the term “queer” cautiously throughout this work in the spirit in which it was intended. While terms such as “gay” and “lesbian” are largely derived from a gender and sexual binary that revolves around succinct and discrete identities based on the articulation of same sex desire, “queer” emerged as a radical term that sought to politicize a range of sexualities. Queer theory as a body of scholarship, while often associated with studies of same sex desire and gay and lesbian communities, in fact seeks to challenge succinct categories of sexuality and gender. Some argue that the main aim of queer theory as a body of scholarship is not to study gay and lesbian subjects or same sex desire, but rather to deconstruct heteronormativity as the benchmark of normalcy (Beemyn and Eliason 1996). For that reason, the term continues to have value, particularly in relation to postcolonial sexualities.

If one accepts that the fictions of heteronormativity are supported by and work to support the European nation state, then queering the nation can and should also be part of the postcolonial project. The phantasmatic imaginings of heteronormativity are tied to imagined racial purity: the construction of the idealised white, middle-class family as foundational to the nation state not only constructs “queers” as deviant, but imagines racialized others to be sexually suspect as well. The fiction of the happy white, middle-class, heteronormative family not only marks gay and lesbian bodies as queer but also envisions racialized bodies as literally “queer” in the sense that such bodies are out of place in the national familial script (Emberley 2007). Hence, I use the term queer in the spirit in which it was originally intended, as an attempt to politicize and interrogate sexual categories and norms and their relationship to larger social and political questions.

Both the rhetoric of homophobic nationalism and neo-colonial missionary discourses of “Gay International” movements place queer postcolonial subjects in inaudible, invisible spaces (Massad 2007). In looking at Mohabeer’s films, I am interested in how the aesthetics of film might offer the queer female Indo-Caribbean subject a non-linear narrative, which disrupts colonial ideals of “progress” that define both international developmental thinking as well as mainstream ideas of sexuality.

Mohabeer’s non-traditional film techniques speak to how colonial ideals of rationality are often unable to contain the shifting bodies and broken narratives of queer postcolonial subjects. Rather than offering “the true story” of the Caribbean queer, she questions the ability of postcolonial subjects to articulate themselves in clear-cut terms.

## Introducing Michelle Mohabeer

Michelle Mohabeer is a Guyanese filmmaker of mixed race ancestry who currently lives and works in Toronto. She has made several short films including the documentary *Exposure*<sup>1</sup> (Mohabeer 1990) which was made as part of Studio D's Five Feminist Minutes project in Toronto. Her films include *Echoes*,<sup>2</sup> *Child Play*,<sup>3</sup> *Coconut/Cane and Cutlass*<sup>4</sup>, and most recently *Blu in You*<sup>5</sup> (Mohabeer 2003; 1998; 1998; 2008). In the summer of 2008, I interviewed Mohabeer at her home in Toronto. I will use Mohabeer's words, secondary texts and snippets of her films to discuss the insights she offers into the complexities of dissident desire in the Caribbean and Caribbean diaspora.

## Between a rock and a hard place:

### Ethnography, pornography, and the invisibility of queer women of colour

In *Desiring Arabs*, Joseph Massad makes a forceful argument regarding the imperialist impulses of what he terms "the Gay international". Dealing specifically with writings and

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<sup>1</sup> *Exposure*, 16mm, 8 minutes, written and directed by Michelle Mohabeer (NFB/Studio Canada, 1990). The Canadian film distribution centre states that *Exposure* is "an experimental documentary that explores issues of race, sexuality and cultural identity. A dialogue between two lesbians of colour (Japanese-Canadian and Afro-Caribbean) is intercut with photographs, texts, paintings and voice-over." Canadian Film Distribution Centre. Online catalogue. <http://www.cfmdc.org/home.php> (accessed December 1, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> *Echoes*, Experimental Digital Video, written and directed by Michelle Mohabeer (Toronto, Canada: Third Eye Productions, 2003). *Echoes* is described by the Canadian film distribution centre as a film in which, "A woman reflects on the off-beat moments and stirrings of girlhood experiences that shaped her life." I would add that the film is very much a story about a young woman's upbringing in postcolonial Guyana, which uses experimental film techniques, music, and satire to comment on the ironies of exile. Canadian Film Distribution Centre. Online catalogue. <http://www.cfmdc.org/home.php> (accessed December 1, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> *Child Play*, 16 mm narrative, written and directed by Michelle Mohabeer (Toronto, Canada: Third Eye Productions, 1998). The Vancouver International Film Festival states that *Child Play* is "a stunning surreal allegorical dream-tale about a woman in her late 60's colonized by fears of the usurpation of her identity by the Dutchman Spirit of a child molester she met as a young girl. Through a complex narrative structure and style the film evokes the psyche and dream-state of the elder woman." See artist's website: <http://www.bluinyou.com/> (accessed December 1, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> *Coconut/Cane and Cutlass*, 16 mm, 32 minutes, hybrid documentary, written and directed by Michelle Mohabeer (Toronto, Canada: Third Eye Productions, 1998). *Women Make Movies* state that "Coconut/Cane & Cutlass weaves a rich lyrical tapestry of imagery shot on location in Guyana melded with dramatic scenes shot in Toronto to communicate a complex, lyrical and touching rumination on exile and displacement. Narrated from the point of view of a mixed race Indo-Caribbean lesbian, 'the exile' (and filmmaker) who migrated to Canada as a young girl, this beautiful film explores personal experiences of identity as they relate to colonial and sexual oppression." See artist's website: <http://www.bluinyou.com/> (accessed December 1, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> *Blu in You*, 50 minutes, essayist documentary, written and directed by Michelle Mohabeer (Toronto, Canada: Third Eye Productions, 2008). *Blu in You* is "is an essayist rumination mediated through the lens of a female observer (Melanie Smith), who watches the staged conversations between a visual arts curator (Andrea Fatona) and a writer (Nalo Hopkinson). These conversations bridge historical and contemporary representations of the black female body, subjectivity and sexuality exploring various thematics from a cultural history of violence and spectacularization (embodied in the figure of 'the Hottentot Venus') to discussions of art, representation and celebrated cultural icons (Josephine Baker, Dorothy Dandridge and the figure of the muse Jeanne Duval), to a contemporary black queer female erotic body and sexuality." See artist's website: <http://www.bluinyou.com/> (accessed December 1, 2008).

activist interventions pertaining to the Middle East, Massad argues that the need to find a subject that approximates Western articulations of same sex desire misses the nuanced ways in which sexualities operate in non-Western spaces, while also having disastrous practical effects. The need for an overt articulation of same sex desire that mimics queer communities in the West serves not only to mute other forms of sexual expression and practice, but also rather ironically has increased the amount of policing of dissident sexuality in Middle Eastern contexts (Massad 2007).<sup>6</sup> Massad's "Gay international" consists of predominantly white, affluent men who direct an imperialist gaze towards non-Western sexual dissidents in similar ways that the white Western women's movement has incited a colonial discourse of perpetually oppressed "third world women" (Mohanty 1988).

These acts are at best missionary impulses and at worst racist visions which imagine "the Other" to be steeped in a pre-modern barbarism that circumscribes the possibility of same sex practices. It should be noted that Massad's work deals almost exclusively with attitudes toward same sex desire among men. While Massad argues that Orientalism structures the Western gaze toward male same sex desire, I would argue that Orientalism makes female same sex desire in non-Western contexts virtually invisible (Gopinath 2005).

On the other side of this debate are nationalist governments which pathologize same sex desire as at best a form of Western cooption and at worst a heathenistic form of deviance. Again, it is interesting that invisibility also colours attitudes toward same sex female desire in nationalist writing. Acts of homophobia by vigilant nationalists have often been against men who have sex with men. While one could argue that this lack of negative attention towards female same sex desire is positive, I believe it speaks to the complete invisibility of women's dissident desire in postcolonial contexts (Silvera 1996; Alexander 1997).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). Massad writes specifically of Egypt and the need to identify and articulate dissident desire in various ways as the increasing presence of gay male culture has created a definable group that can now be policed. While some would argue that this identification of dissident desire as "gay" helps to normalize same sex desire and to construct queers as a recognizable political cleavage, Massad argues that men who have sex with men have ironically had to face more state-led and police persecution now that they are identified as "gay."

<sup>7</sup> There are notable exceptions to this, namely the works of Makeda Silvera and Jacqui Alexander who have written about queer female desire in the Caribbean. See Makeda Silvera, "Man Royals and Sodomites", in *Lesbian Subjects: A Feminist Studies Reader*, ed. Martha Vicinus (Indiana University Press, 1996), 167–77); Jacqui Alexander, "Erotic Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonisation: An Anatomy of Feminist and State Practice in the Bahamas Tourist Economy", in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, and Democratic Futures*, ed. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty (London: Routledge, 1997). However, while these writers offer revolutionary works that attempt to make queer female desire in the Caribbean visible, I would argue that more work needs to be done in this area. Here, I am in agreement with Gopinath that much contemporary postcolonial theory builds upon nationalist writings which have predominantly been both heterosexist and masculinist in their imagining of colonized and postcolonial subjectivities.

### **Forms that form the native informant:**

#### **The avant garde's refusal to "museumise" the Other**

Where do queer non-Western and/or diasporic female subjects find articulation among these competing discourses? I want to argue that the forms through which same sex desires are articulated are just as important as what is said. The non-Western queer, like the non-Western woman, is invited to adopt the position of the native informant through developmental discourse, academic theory, and documentary art and exhibiting (Ansari 2008).<sup>8</sup> Drawing on the work of Gayatri Spivak, Shahnaz Khan argues that "white capitalist culture accepts native informants to the extent that we 'museumise' or exoticise our national origin." (Khan 2005; Spivak 1995) I agree with Spivak and Khan, and want to further suggest that certain narrative forms might lend themselves to this "museumisation". I believe that narrative forms and disciplines which emphasise "truthful", mimetic representations of "Other" cultures often lend themselves to native informing. Khan draws on the work of Daphne Patai who has argued that "research itself depends on a subject/object split through which the objectification and exploitation of the object of research are integral to the design of the project." (Khan 2005) Similarly, I would argue that museum style exhibiting and classical documentary film and photography also invite a fetishistic gaze that objectifies those being represented and constructs both artist and spectator as superior in their ability to watch, judge and remain at a distance from those who become objects of study or spectacle.

Trinh T Minh ha argues that one must acknowledge "the irreducibility of the object studied and the impossibility of delivering its presence, reproducing it as it is in its truth, reality, and otherness." (Minh-ha 1989, 70) Perhaps this acknowledgement of irreducibility might be possible within avant garde artistic forms and spaces that often allow for complex, nonlinear, unfinished stories to be told. In refusing to tell the "truth" of queerness in the Caribbean, Mohabeer's work avoids a native informant position, while questioning how histories are told, and how contemporary ideas of sexuality are tied to colonialism.

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<sup>8</sup> For an excellent discussion of the ways in which the native informant is used within diasporic film and popular cultures, see Usamah Ansari, "Should I Go and Pull her Burqa Off? Feminist Compulsions, Insider Consent, and *A Return to Kandahar*", *Critical Studies in Media and Communication* 25, no. 1 (2008) 48–67. Ansari critiques the film, *A Return to Kandahar*, made by Afghani Canadian Nelofer Pazira and Paul Jay for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Ansari argues that while Pazira is able to position herself as a community "insider", the narrative she tells is one of a native informant, who is used to telling Western audiences about non-Western contexts in ways that confirm the superiority of white Westernness and invite imperialist interventions. Ansari states that while Pazira's status as an Afghani Canadian woman, "may support contemporary debates around authority over voice and representation, it also produces the native informant: the classic anthropological sidekick who tells her faithful audience about the novel idiosyncrasies of her 'traditional' society while inviting various interventionist discourses... *Return to Kandahar* is not merely a site where series of discourses including feminist interventionist compulsions and Orientalist tropes on modernity and Islam are negotiated, it is also a site where Pazira becomes an Orientalized insider subject who mediates the audience's encounter with the Other; she is positioned within a supposedly traditional society and yet also exposed enough to modernity to speak to the audience" (48). I would argue that Pazira's work is part of a larger trend within state-funded Canadian film, whereby non-white, non-Western "others" are elicited to tell similar narratives in which their hyphenated status lends their narrative authority while also confirming the benevolence and superiority of Western nations.

### **Of Autoethnographies and Disidentifications: queers of colour live to tell**

In “The Autoethnographic Performance: Reading Richard Fung’s Queer Hybridity”, taken from his work *Disidentifications: Queers of Colour and the Performance of Politics*, Jose Munoz discusses how films by queer artists of colour rupture both the ethnographic gaze of colonialist discourse and the exoticising gaze of mainstream white queer pornography. Munoz argues that “Fung’s video ‘visualizes’ the workings of power in ethnographic and pornographic films, two discourses that assign subjects such as Fung, colonized, colored, and queer, the status of terminally ‘other’ object.” (Munoz 1999, 78) Munoz argues that many queers of colour use strategies of “disidentitfication” to subvert discourses of racism and homophobia. He states as follows:

Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism, this “working on and against” is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance (Ibid, 12).

Mohabeer’s films can be read as disidentificatory in her troubling of heteronormative notions of Caribbeanness and white Western notions of queerness. Like Fung’s work, Mohabeer’s Indo-Caribbean ancestry also troubles a dominant cultural imaginary which aligns Caribbeanness with Blackness, and a racist-sexist imaginary that imagines brown women to be sexually passive and straight. (Khan 2005)

### **(Super) model minorities? Autoethnography as a means of queering the script of brown female heteronormativity**

Historically, brown female bodies have often been used to confirm Western and masculinist superiority whether they appear in the films of colonial anthropologists or contemporary World vision style development discourse. Lidchi discusses the politics of ethnography, looking specifically at the imperialist underpinnings of museum exhibiting. She states the following:

What needs to be noted about ethnographic museums is that they do not simply reflect natural distinctions but serve to create cultural ones, which acquire their cogency when viewed through the filtering lens of a particular discipline. The geographical and social distinctions deployed are constructed, but equally they are located historically: in the struggle for power between what has been called “the West and the Rest”. (Lidchi 1997)

It should also be added that ethnographic spectacles of “the Other” have always been sexualized, producing “the Other” as deviant in relation to a white, Western, masculinist norm of bodily and moral control. When queer people of colour produce films, they

enter into this history of ethnographic spectacle. However, as Munoz so beautifully argues, queer “autoethnography” disidentifies with ethnography in subversive ways. Munoz draws on the work of Pratt who states as follows:

I use these terms (autoethnography and autoethnographic expression) to refer to instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways which engage with the colonizer’s own terms. If ethnographic texts are a means in which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations (Munoz 1999, 81).

He argues that conventional documentaries can be read as reflecting a colonizing and metropolitan gaze, which emphasises knowing a fixed subject and making a spectacle of Otherness. However, in relation to Fung’s work, he states that “autoethnography”

...is a strategy that seeks to disrupt the hierarchical economy of colonial images and representations by making visible the presence of subaltern energies and urgencies in metropolitan culture. Autoethnography worries easy binarisms such as colonized and colonizer or subaltern and metropolitan by presenting subaltern speech through the channels and pathways of metropolitan representational systems. (Ibid, 82)

Mohabeer’s films are autoethnographic in that she uses techniques of documentary filmmaking while also subverting the rationalist rules of this classical form. The subverting of a linear, literal story works firstly to challenge the idea that film can tell an absolute truth about a people. Secondly, non-traditional avant garde aesthetics are used to trouble the idea that human subjectivity itself is fixed. “The truth” of the colonized subject that classical ethnography tells is troubled by the reality of hybrid identities, of shifting borders and boundaries between colonized/colonizer, oppressed/oppressor. Similarly, “the truth” of Caribbean queerness is also troubled through the aesthetic form of Mohabeer’s films, which refuse an easy narrative of queer liberation or repression. Rather, postcolonial sexual identities are presented as untranslatable fragments of memory, sensory experience and desire.

### **Sharp cutlasses and sharper cuts:**

#### **The imbrication of form and content in Mohabeer's works**

Mohabeer states quite clearly that the form and content of her works are deeply intertwined:

How I manipulate the form actually comments on the content. Specifically I did it in *Coconut*, in *Child’s Play* and in *Blu in You*. Those three films in particular. My work is actually informed by post-modern aesthetics. Not just postcolonial because it’s trying to use certain forms. (Mohabeer 2008)

In reference to her short experimental work *Echoes*, she discusses her disidentification with major Western cinema through the use of intertext:

*Echoes* references a very old film about Billy the Kid actually called the *Outlaw* that was made by Howard Hughes. He had Jane Russell who was the woman who looks Mexican. It has to do with Billy the Kid who tries to rape her. That's the scene I use but I cut it very tightly cropped so it looks like she is attacking him. I was trying to comment on the idea of strong women and not being overpowered by men. And relating that to sexuality. The idea of owning one's sexuality. (Ibid)

Mohabeer's films use aesthetic strategies to disidentify with the masculinist ethos of Hollywood filmic representation, which constructs women of colour as sexual prey for white men. Furthermore, I would argue that her strategies are autoethnographic. Both *Echoes* and *Child's Play* are narrated in the first person, using a narrative voice that is queer, of colour and female.

Mohabeer states that this narrative voice has often been mistaken as being solely autobiographical, "If certain white folks watch your work and they can't find themselves in it, they denigrate it. Someone...said that *Coconut* was all about me and I beg to differ." (Ibid) She draws on the ideas of Manthia Diwara to argue that the use of the "I" in works by filmmakers of colour takes on a plural connotation:

When people of colour use I it is not just referring to I as subject. I is used in a very different way. It's used in a plural way. I is used in an autobiographical context but it's also used in a very different way. But it also has another aspect—of a commentator, commenting on history, commenting on culture. The filmmaker using I doesn't mean that it's all about them and their own personal subjectivity. And my film tends to do this because I use a lot of poetics and these poetics have abstract elements in them. (Ibid)

The notion of "autobiography" as a solely personal narrative is troubled by Mohabeer's films in that the self that is evoked is not an essentialist, individualist one but is formed and reformed through history and politics and in relation to others. This troubling of autobiography is something that filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha has also written about in relation to her own work. Minh-ha like Mohabeer states that "my films have too often been described as a 'personal film', as 'personal documentary' or 'subjective documentary'." (Minh-ha 1992, 119) She further states the following:

Although I accept these terms, I think they really need to be problematised, redefined and expanded. Because personal in the context of my films does not mean an individual standpoint or the foregrounding of a self. I am not interested in using film to "express myself", but rather to expose the social self (and selves) which necessarily mediates the making as well as the viewing of the film. (Ibid)



Similarly, Mohabeer's films are often categorized as being "autobiographical" in ways that reinstate a binary between subjective and objective knowledge. Minh-ha problematizes this binary within documentary tradition:

There is nothing objective and truly impersonal in filmmaking, although there can be a formulaic, clichéd approach to film. What you often have is a mere abidance by the conventions of documentary practice, which is put forward as the "objective" way to document other cultures. It is as if the acknowledgement of the politics of the documentation and the documenting subject disturbs because the interests at stake are too high for the guardians of norms. (Ibid)

Mohabeer's films like *Minh ha's*, disturb the objectivist stance within traditional documentary forms by articulating a subjective narrative. The usual dispassionate imperialist gaze of camera and artist is subverted by a very personal tale that ruptures the divide between objective and subjective realities.

**Autoerotics and autoethnographies: Queers of colour and the politics of narrative**

Far from being an autobiographical documentary, Mohabeer's films are autoethnographic works that use the lens of the personal to touch on themes of colonialism and resistance. Munoz states as follows:

Autoethnography is a strategy that seeks to disrupt the hierarchical economy of colonial images and representations by making visible the presence of subaltern energies and urgencies in metropolitan culture. Autoethnography worries easy binarisms such as colonized and the colonizer or subaltern and metropolitan by presenting subaltern speech through the channels and pathways of metropolitan representational systems. (Munoz 1999, 82)

Mohabeer's work troubles binaries of not only colonized and colonizer, but also home and away, foreigner and citizen, homo and hetero, and black and white. By depicting the story of a mixed race queer woman from Guyana who has been exiled in North America, Mohabeer uses the peculiarities of her experience to comment on the ironies of nation, identity and exile.

*Coconut/Cane Cutlass* begins in Guyana, and narrates the experiences of both the film's narrator, played by Mohabeer, and poet Mahadai Das. The film centres on the intersectional experiences of oppression and disparate social locations, which these figures inhabit. Like *Fung*, Mohabeer shares the position of being not only a sexual minority in a popular landscape that imagines heterosexuality to be compulsory, but a racial minority in a landscape that imagines the Caribbean to be black. As Munoz says of *Fung*,

Fung's status as Asian in a primarily black and white colonial situation further contributes to Fung's postcolonial identity. An Asian in such a setting, like an Asian in the already subcultural field of (white-dominated) gay male culture, is at least double fragmented from the vantage point of dominant culture. (Ibid, 92)

Mohabeer's use of autoethnography as both a queer and a mixed race subject troubles how ethnography recites the story of dominant sexual and racial groups as representing an entire people. Like Fung, Mohabeer disidentifies with dominant ethnographies in her exposure of the subaltern sexual and racial energies that inform both Western and postcolonial nations.

**The longings for an imagined landscape: Soil on the lens of the nation in *Coconut/Cane and Cutlass***

*Coconut/Cane and Cutlass* moves back and forth between Guyana and Canada. Far from a colonialist native informant tale or romantic nationalist tale, her work fails to discount the oppressive tensions that mark the bodies of queer women of colour in both colony and metropole. Mohabeer uses filmic aesthetics to comment on the movement of diasporic peoples and the concomitant feelings of both alienation and belonging that these subjects experience on disparate landscapes. As Mohabeer says of the film,

The idea of movement and history is important to this film. Tishona Gabrielle writes about that in relation to third cinema. And this film really works with third cinematic aesthetics as well as in terms of movement and history and reclaiming that in terms of how we as diasporic people shift from one space to the next and this film deals with all of those spatial locales, those shifts. (Mohabeer 2008)

The idea of landscape as both enabling and preventing desire is central to Mohabeer's work. She comments on one particularly evocative scene in *Coconut Cane and Cutlass* in which two lovers are separated by a barbed wire fence in Guyana:

The film moves from tropical landscapes to kind of an interior space where you have two lovers separated by barbed wire. So basically, it's creating spaces of enclosure, at times, spaces that might seem tight and intimate and spaces that are also expansive to a degree. (Ibid)

One of the most memorable scenes in *Coconut/Cane and Cutlass*, a scene that in and of itself has won international recognition, is the rich, sensual love scene that happens between two Indo-Caribbean women.

What is striking about the scene is not only the eroticism that happens between bodies, but how Mohabeer uses the Guyanese landscape to frame desire between the two lovers. The barbed wire fence that separates the lovers acts as a commentary on how the manmade strictures that define the borders of physical space work to police desire. However, the shot of the rich natural landscape of Guyana interspersed with the women's

sexual desire for one another paints the postcolonial landscape as one that can enable desire. The presence of same sex desire in postcolonial space troubles dominant nationalist and neo-colonial readings of the Caribbean as a heteronormative space. Mohabeer states that one of her aims is to normalize same sex desire between Caribbean women and specifically between brown women. She states that “The sex scene demonstrates that as well. The shots are medium frames, everything is close. That proximity is conveying that intimacy.” (Ibid) This closeness between women is depicted as being a feature of, rather than an anomaly within, the global south.

### **Stuck in the middle with you:**

#### **Reframing the Middle Passage as a space of sexual dissidence**

One of the opening shots of the film recreates the Middle Passage between India and Guyana, showing Indian women being taken from the Indian subcontinent to the Caribbean. What is striking is how Mohabeer creates the feeling of intimacy between Indian women. Of this opening sequence, Mohabeer states, “The film is very disjunctive. It has different phases. It starts off with a historical phase from India to the Caribbean, but they perform a kind of loss. So they seem like lovers, or potentially mother or daughter. There’s a closeness to them in some way.”(Ibid) The construction of the Middle Passage as a potential site of queer female desire speaks to how histories of female indenture are marked by sexual politics.

In *Mobilizing India: Women, Music, and Migration Between India and Trinidad*, Tejaswini Niranjana discusses the sexual politics that coloured patterns of female indentureship from India to the Eastern Caribbean. She cites the work of Mangru who notes the following in relation to British Guiana:

Criticisms regarding the type of women imported had not been wanting. Immigration officials and others often referred to their “loose and depraved character” and condemned the Emigration Agents for shipping “the sweepings” of Calcutta and other large Indian cities. (Niranjana 2006, 62)

There were consistent reports from colonial officials which questioned the sexual morality of Indian female indentured labourers, suggesting that it was only women who had “gone astray” that were recruited without opposition from male family members (Ibid, 62-73). While these reports pathologize Indo-Caribbean women, they also speak to the potential for sexual transgression. This is not to discount the regulation of Indian women’s sexualities in the Caribbean; however, it points to how forced migration might have ironically created the potential for sexual dissidence.

Reddock and Mohammed make note of the low female to male ratio within indentured populations (Reddock 1994; Mohammed 2002). While this low ratio is used to explain the mass murder of indentured women, it is also used to explain why women were in positions to leave partners or have multiple partners (Niranjana 2006, 58-73). Again, migration may have allowed Indo-Caribbean woman a sexually transgressive space which may have otherwise been impossible in India during this time period.

What Niranjana also points out is the inability to piece together concrete histories that can ascertain the sexual lives of Indo-Caribbean women living on plantations (Ibid 70–73). Anecdotal evidence and colonial narratives which pathologize the sexual lives of “coolie women” come to stand in for history. Mohabeer uses imaginative strategies to rewrite these histories in ways that construct the possibility of emergent queer subjectivity within the space of the Middle Passage and the plantation. However, unlike the realist narratives of colonial discourse, Mohabeer’s work politicizes fantasy as a space from which normative histories can be unravelled. Beginning from the premise that masculinist, heteronormative accounts of colonialism are not the only story to be told, her films open up the possibility that the plundering projects of conquest could have created spaces of desire.

**Echoes of “Queer” before it was named as such: The untranslatable desires of non-Western space in *Coconut Cane/and Cutlass* and *Echoes***

This normalizing of same sex desire in postcolonial space also occurs in *Echoes*. The short film narrates the migration of a young girl from the Caribbean to North America. At one point, we hear the narrative voice state that she was sad to leave Guyana because she would be leaving her first girlfriend behind. The dominant Gay International discourse, which imagines the postcolonial nation to be a closet that the diasporic queer subject must flee from, is complicated in this moment. Just as *Coconut/Cane and Cutlass* uses closeness between women in the Middle Passage to suggest the possibility of dissident desire, *Echoes* suggests that the freedom that the narrator experienced as a child in Guyana lent itself to a sexual freedom that is neither named as “queer” nor experienced in the Western world. These moments of untranslatability belie Western categories of gay/straight, out/in, touching upon Massad’s argument that same sex practices in non-Western contexts have always been in existence, yet fail to be intelligible within Eurocentric categories of sexuality.

From the subtle positioning of women’s bodies in sensuous proximity while travelling through the Middle Passage to her mention of the sexual play that occurs between children in rural postcolonial settings, Mohabeer creates an imaginative space for dissident desire in the global south to find expression. It is not the space of bourgeois Westernised gay culture in major urban centres, spaces which often exist almost exclusively for affluent men. Rather, it is a space that defies categories of gay versus straight or in versus out. These spaces not only challenge the heteronormative story of citizenship that nationalist Caribbean leaders often tell, but also the tale of third world gay repression that is often told by Western gay and lesbian movements.

**A love letter to a country: Celluloid dreams of belonging**

*Coconut/Cane and Cutlass* is rich in its poetic rendering of sexuality, exile and longing. As Mohabeer states, “the opening is basically a love letter to a country. A country that I felt I was disowned by because of sexuality, because I couldn’t claim that sexuality in that space.” (Mohabeer 2008) The film begins with a long shot of the narrator standing on a jetty and surveying the landscape. This scene complicates an ethnographic gaze in which the colonized female subject is the object and not the writer of history.

Mohabeer's "love letter to a country" also disidentifies with a dominant heteronormative nationalist story in which the love of nation is often tied to a masculinist and heterosexual imperative.

In *Coconut/Cane and Cutlass*, it is the queer woman's impossible yet persistent longing for same sex desire and for a connection to a nation that become central. Mohabeer quotes the opening lines of the film, "My eyes survey history and my grandmother's children," (Ibid) and discusses the visual images that accompany the narrative. "There's a shot of the filmmaker but the exile, looking over the landscape... It places the woman as this kind of powerful engine in the film," she explains (Ibid). *Coconut/Cane and Cutlass* not only centres the figure of the queer female exile, it also tells the story of Mahadai Das, an Indo-Caribbean poet who lives in Guyana and whose poems Mohabeer interprets throughout the work. She states as follows:

I interpret a poem by Mahadai Das and in interpreting that poem—we're both interpreting it—her and I, because we're the exiles in the film. I interpret the poem with that shot of me staring across the landscape. So landscape becomes an integral part of my work as well—to create the sense of interior/exterior worlds. (Ibid)

Mohabeer is adamant in her assertion that the technical strategies she employs as a filmmaker are inseparable from the political and philosophical underpinnings of her work:

I use something called front screen projection. Front screen projection really created these layers. So you have one layer in the back and one in the front and you're shooting them together. So the idea of these layers is really talking about how identity is not any kind of one easy thing and my work troubles this by moving through multiple layers. (Ibid)

The use of post-modern aesthetics creates a text that allows for the hybridity of identity and for the non-linear nature of history to find expression.

### **No saris and samosas here: Mohabeer's films and a Black British aesthetic**

Mohabeer's work also challenges a culture of political Canadian documentary filmmaking that has tended to emphasise linear narratives and didacticism in their approach to diasporic communities. In classical Canadian NFB-style documentary, emphasis has often been placed on having people of colour tell "the truth" about "their communities" to the general white Canadian population at the expense of an attention to artistry, and to theoretical debates that question fixed ideas of "culture" (Walcott 2001).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For an excellent discussion concerning the politics of Canadian multiculturalism as it relates to Black popular culture see Rinaldo Walcott, "Caribbean Pop in Canada: Or the Impossibility of Belonging to the Nation", *Small Axe* (2001) 123–139. Following on from Walcott, I want to argue that this focus on cultural show and tell, and the assumed homogeneity of "ethnic" communities are part of a larger rhetoric of Canadian multiculturalism which fixates on the supposed cultural difference of the nation's racial and religious others in order to maintain a story of pure French and English origins. Having non-white people tell the story of "their communities" works to mask the ways in which the displacement of First Nations people and the exploitation of people of colour is *the* story of Canada. The fetishization of seeing cultural

Mohabeer argues that her films have often been misread by Canadian audiences as lacking political salience because of their lyricism,

I never actually intended for *Coconut/Cane and Cutlass* to be linear. I always wanted for it to be poetic to a certain degree. That's why when I applied for funding from the arts council, the jury didn't get it. They didn't get that I wanted to make this lyrical documentary. Because they're used to seeing documentaries that have so called political themes not be lyrical. The idea of politics and lyricism, they don't seem to blend or be sustainable for certain people in terms of how they blend—in terms of also how they think people of colour should make work. (Mohabeer 2008)

She goes on to argue that her work, therefore, corresponds more to Black British Cinema:

That's why I'd say my work is so paralleled and influenced by the Black British work as opposed to Canadian or even North American. I really have this idea of lyricism and aesthetics being very strong and developed in the work that really spoke to politics. So the form really spoke to the content. I was trying to not be political in the sense of just showing people in the usual, typical ways, i.e. talking heads. (Ibid)

The Black British context is marked by a different history in which Black British filmmakers have often been able to express themselves as artists rather than as cultural or community ambassadors.

### **Sankofa and the Black British school: Rewriting the fairytales of multicultural show and tell.**

Manthia Diwara writes of the Sankofa Film and Video Collective, a group of Black British filmmakers who formed in the 1980's, producing work that challenged the notion of objective filmmaking and spectatorship, politicising the identity of both filmmaker and audience. The collective, through which Isaac Julien made much of his early work, has influenced Mohabeer's use of aesthetics to comment on and complicate understandings

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difference, the celebration of "saris and samosas," displaces any discussion of land claims or systemic racism. As Rinaldo Walcott says of Canadian multiculturalism, "All the material and discursive practices congeal around the repetition of a particular 'origin' that cannot admit to Others. It is thus the work of the Multiculturalism Act and, in the case of Native peoples, the Indian Act, through which the Others are made adjunct to the nation as not-quite-citizens. Such a designation is dependent upon a 'migrant ethnicity' where 'national' belonging is paradoxically placed outside the nation—that is the function of official multicultural policy." (128) I would argue that mainstream state-funded Canadian film is complicit in this placing of people of colour outside the nation, as the narratives that are often elicited from Canada's various Others are ones in which diasporic people are made to tell stories of inter-community conflict and cultural practice which neither challenge Canada's national myth of English and French founding fathers, nor contaminate the white settler narrative with any mention of colonialism or racism. As Walcott further states, "Sacred temples of culture are fabricated and used to conceal our various 'cross-cultural resonances.' Us/Them positions are articulated, and imagined communities attempt to make pure and uncontaminated their 'heritable traits'" (133).

of political and documentary film. She cites Julien and the other Black British filmmakers from this period as being among her primary influences (Ibid).

Diwara discusses *Territories*, a short film made by Julien in 1985 which interrogates how traditional British documentary has represented the Caribbean. Diwara states about *Territories* as follows:

[It] is concerned with how narrative forms, such as conventional BBC documentaries, violently insert the Caribbean into European history. Focusing on the televisual representation of carnival by the BBC, the film comments on its strategies of containment, and omission of black cultural and subversive practices. (Diwara 1996, 196)

*Territories* juxtaposes BBC documentary images of carnival with scenes of two black British filmmakers deconstructing their racist underpinnings. Mohabeer's *Blu in You*, which features writer Nalo Hopkinson and curator and visual arts critic Andrea Fatona as they comment on representations of Black female sexuality, shares a great deal in common with *Territories* and other works by the Sankofa collective.

In *Blu in You*, much as in *Territories*, what is being troubled is the objective "I" of both filmmaker and audience. Diwara states that in *Territories*,

...images on the monitor screen are blurred whenever the camera attempts to occupy the position of one of the spectators to show selected scenes of carnival. The blurred images indicate that instead of "standing in the place of the Absent One" and reconstructing the narrative of carnival, the two spectators disrupt the continuity of the documentary through a selection of individual scenes which are analysed in order to reveal the way the BBC projects a Eurocentric definition on carnival: i.e., the depiction of blacks as noble savages. (Ibid, 197)

Blurring techniques are also employed in Mohabeer's work to comment on the impossibility of racial representation. In one particularly striking sequence, while Hopkinson comments on how the black female body appears in film as an exotic spectacle, Mohabeer blurs Hopkinson's image, leaving the audience with a series of psychedelic impressions. This blurring suggests that even in watching Hopkinson and Fontana deconstruct black fetishism, we may reproduce the decerebrating gaze<sup>10</sup> that often informs acts of racialized looking (Carby 2004). These moments of rupture implicate the audience, filmmaker and camera in a history of spectral violence through which visual technologies have been used to fix colonized bodies.

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<sup>10</sup> The term "decerebration" was first used by Frantz Fanon in relation to the ways in which racism strips subjects of humanity. For an excellent discussion of the ways in which this gaze operates within visual cultures, see Hazel Carby, "A Strange and Bitter Crop: The Spectacle of Torture", *Opendemocracy* (October 10, 2004), [http://www.opendemocracy.net/media-abu\\_ghraib/article\\_2149.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/media-abu_ghraib/article_2149.jsp). Accessed: December 12, 2008.

### **Where coolies became ‘cool’: A reliance on a Black British tradition**

Mohabeer’s connection to Black British film also relates to her place within a queer Caribbean film tradition. Discourses of Canadian multiculturalism often use the term “South Asian” to refer to brown bodies, thereby enabling certain articulations of South Asian diasporic subjectivity in popular and public cultures (Handa 2003). Within the Canadian context Indo-Caribbean identity is often lost between an India-centred South Asian community and an African-centred Caribbean community. The equating of Caribbean with Blackness also speaks to the narrow lens through which the region as a whole is imagined within Canadian popular culture. According to Rinaldo Walcott,

Caribbean in Canada, then, is really a pseudonym for blackness. The trope of the Caribbean in Canada denies many of the complexities of Caribbeanness and therefore belies complex understandings of the place. (Walcott 2001, 128)

While similar debates and tensions exist in the United Kingdom, Black British cultural production comes out of a decidedly different discursive and political history.

Early Indo-Caribbean artists in Britain were often able to make their works intelligible and visible under a broader “Black British” identity which included British Asians. For example, filmmaker Roshini Kempadoo discusses the home she found within early Black British art communities. Kempadoo, like Mohabeer, is a mixed race woman with Indo-Caribbean origins. However, while Mohabeer discusses how she was often alienated from predominantly Afro Caribbean and South Asian artistic communities, Kempadoo argues that she was able to identify easily with Black British culture.

Kempadoo writes as follows of her documentation of the lives of “Black” British subjects whose migratory routes to Britain were disparate:

I was...documenting specific everyday events and experiences of Caribbean and Asian communities in Leicester, Birmingham and Coventry. The general lack of visibility of black communities and the stereotyped images in the popular media were of immediate concern, particularly in the context of the riots of the early 1980s. The social documentary genre—its relationship to historical and archival material and to contemporary celebration—played an important role, highlighting the different lifestyles of Britain’s black populations, while inscribing a personal authorship that situated the black photographer behind the camera. (Kempadoo 2007, 203)

Kempadoo’s experiences producing art within the Black British arts scene share similarities with the Canadian context around this period. As with Canada, there appears to be a focus on using genres of documentary to celebrate and document various communities. However, I would argue that there are striking differences as well. Firstly, Kempadoo aligned herself with a Black British arts community in ways that Mohabeer argues Indo-Caribbean identified people have not been able to in Canada, often being



identified as being part of the South Asian diaspora despite their more immediate links to the Caribbean. Secondly, I believe that this access to a Black British arts movement and identity has allowed Indo-Caribbean and British Asian artists to make more highly politicized works. The Black British arts movement seemed to be constantly grappling with issues of systemic racism in Britain. This context seems markedly different from dominant Canadian multicultural cinema made by South Asian artists that often politicises issues of culture and inter-community violence at the expense of salient discussions of “race” and racism. Therefore, Mohabeer’s alignment with the Black British context is not only fitting but speaks to the limits of the fixation on “culture” as opposed to “race” within Canadian multicultural discourse (Handa 2003).

Further similarities lie in Mohabeer’s use of avant garde aesthetics to comment on and resituate political discussions. Hall and Bailey argue that rather than focus on documenting the “truth” of a community or a people, Black British artists have worked to challenge the terms of racial representation themselves. On the subject of photography specifically, they state as follows:

Where documentary photography carries a claim to truth, with the meta message of this is how it really was...a number of black photographers began to explore questions of identification, the issue of how best to contest dominant regimes of representation...This mode goes against the grain of realism: indeed it opens up realism and exposes it as a particular genre and privileges instead non-realist modes such as formalism, modernism and surrealism, which can be grouped together under the rubric of avant-gardism. (Diwara 1996, 192)

Similarly, rather than offering a series of positive realist images to counter the false representation of Caribbean queers<sup>11</sup> (Hall 1997), Mohabeer’s work uses avant garde aesthetics to disidentify with static notions of authenticity, rationality, and truth.

### **Melancholia as a site of production: A necessary grief**

It is important to touch also on the psychic resonances of Mohabeer’s deeply emotional works. *Coconut/Cane and Cutlass* begins by quoting postcolonial academic Edward Said who writes that, “Exile is strangely compelling to think about, but terrible to experience.” This duality of the compelling reflection on exile, and the painful experience of displacement runs throughout Mohabeer’s films. Her works negotiate both of Said’s understandings of exile, that of the thoughtful and artistic reflection and that of the lived pain of being alienated from one’s home. However, for Mohabeer and her characters, alienation is not simply solved by physical return, since the returning queer mixed race body continues to be exiled by the nation state’s demands for racial purity and sexual conformity.

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<sup>11</sup> Stuart Hall problematises strategies of “positive” racial representation, arguing that while positive images of Blackness may reverse racist stereotypes, they do nothing to shift the binary and static ways in which we are made to think about and visualize “race.” See Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage Publications, 1997).

Jose Munoz has argued for a reconceptualisation of mourning in relation to the works of queer artists of colour. He examines the place of melancholia in the work of Black queer artists Robert Mapplethorpe and Isaac Julien wherein, he argues, is represented a sense of collective grief which is part of marginalized subjectivity. Munoz states as follows:

Melancholia, for blacks, queers, or any queers of color, is not a pathology but an integral part of everyday lives. The melancholia that occupies the minds of the communities under siege in this film can be envisioned as the revised version of melancholia that Freud wrote about in later years. It is this melancholia that is part of our process of dealing with all the catastrophes that occur in the lives of people of color, lesbians, and gay men. (Munoz 1999, 74)

Writing with reference to Isaac Julien's film *Looking for Langston*, Munoz argues that,

Julien's melancholic signifying on these two different photographs of mourning supplies a necessary history to collective struggle. This history comes in the form of identity-affirming "melancholia," a melancholia that individual subjects and different communities in crises can use to map the ambivalences of identification and the conditions of (im)possibility that shape the minority identities under consideration here. (Ibid)

Mohabeer's films, which as I have argued above, share a great deal in common with the Black British context, also use strategies of melancholia to negotiate the ambivalence of queer racialized subjectivity in her works.

There is a sense of grief that haunts both *Coconut/Cane and Cutlass* and *Blu in You*. Mohabeer discusses the personal difficulties she had in returning to Guyana to make *Coconut/Cane and Cutlass*:

That was the first time I went back to Guyana. That was what was difficult for me with that film because I left when I was 12 and that was the first time I went back as an adult. It was very difficult for me to be in that space because I'd really grown up here and it was difficult just being there. Also going during the election. In Guyana, Indians and Blacks are pretty much pitted against one another. And there was all this looting and burning of Indian shops and all these slurs on both sides. And I was called different names...So the film was very difficult to make emotionally. (Mohabeer 2008)

The emotional difficulty of making a film like *Coconut/Cane and Cutlass* is not simply the individuated melancholia that Freud wrote of (Freud 1917, 237–258). Rather, it resonates with Munoz's notion of collective mourning. The grief of Mohabeer's works is a collective mourning of a queer racialized diasporic subject who does not simply mourn a nation, but an idea of home that may never have existed, that is, a home in which racial minorities and sexual dissidents are treated neither with contempt nor as invisible.

Again, Mohabeer uses aesthetics to signify the communal melancholia of racialized, queer, exiled subjectivity. The film begins with a shot of the narrator who is the figure of exile that guides the film. There is a vivid beauty to the image and yet also an emptiness to the scene. Mohabeer states that, “The tide has gone in and the landscape looks so eerie and there is this idea of surveying history.” (Mohabeer 2008) The history that is being surveyed is one of the deep melancholic loss brought about by colonialism, and postcolonial queer exile. The landscape signifies histories of imperial pillage and plunder, a Caribbean sea haunted by the ghosts of the Middle Passage, the bodies of slaves and indentured labourers brought to Guyana in the service of imperial expansion. This landscape is also haunted by the loss of home experienced by the queer female exile who cannot claim this space because of the homophobia of postcolonial nationalism. This dual sense of loss, born out of both colonialism and homophobia, is also felt in the next scene as we see women being taken from India to Guyana. It is a loss firstly of indenture, of the displacement of the conscripted labourer. However, it is also a loss of possible desire. The closeness of the women, the potential for dissident, untranslatable desire is resignified within the postcolonial nation as criminalized queer desire.

### **Unmasking an indignant gaze: The return of the oppressed**

Mohabeer’s work also uses film to comment on the psychic trauma experienced by racialized queer female bodies. In one striking sequence, the narrator takes on and off a series of masks as the voice-over recites various racial slurs and epithets that are hurled at the body of queer women of colour. This scene of masking and unmasking hearkens back to Frantz Fanon’s seminal work on the psychically alienating effects of racism, *Black Skin, White Masks*. (Fanon 1967) Mohabeer states that in taking on and off the masks, the narrator/exile “exposes all of these layers of things that have been thrown on her and she throws them off her as well. And at the end she does that gaze, that idea of returning the gaze—looking back and reclaiming that moment.” (Mohabeer 2008) This scene evokes Fanon’s idea of the indignant gaze that racism casts onto the racialized body (Fanon 1967). However, in using an Indo-Caribbean woman to return the gaze, Mohabeer subverts Fanon’s masculinist and homophobic tendencies and gestures to possible resistance on the part of racialized queer subjects. She states that this returning of the gaze “is what I find to be most powerful about this scene...because you never see an Indo-Caribbean woman doing that.” (Mohabeer 2008)

*Blu in You* also evokes ideas of trauma and melancholia in relation to histories of slavery. What is central to the film’s commentary on the haunting effects of colonial trauma is its play upon notions of time. The film jumps across time periods, providing a rich filmic genealogy of how Black female bodies are rendered as spectacle. Juxtaposing images of the Hottentot Venus with modern images of Josephine Baker and contemporary representations of Black women in hip hop, we see how traces of colonial fetishism haunt the Black female body.

Mohabeer also states that her shuffling of time serves to comment on the unattainableness of recapturing colonial history in a linear fashion. She states that “Time is always shuffled and jumbled which for me is how colonialism and colonial history took place

and how we interpret it as well because a lot of it is lost as well in that it's left to people's imagination, left to conjecture, left to analysis." (Ibid) Mohabeer uses techniques of film to trouble notions of linear time that not only informed colonial epistemologies, but informed how these histories were told (Bhabha 1993).

The rupturing of time also elucidates the psychic effects of colonization on its subjects. Again, Mohabeer makes reference to Fanon stating that "Fanon is very interesting in this regard because of how he invokes trauma, how he invokes memory—there is a certain kind of real liveness. He invokes real life situations and then turns them and does this whole analysis of it." (Mohabeer 2008) Here, Mohabeer reflects on how Fanon takes seemingly innocuous experiences such as the racism of a child or the banal images in Tarzan and Jane films and points to their colonial resonance (Fanon 1967). He invokes the past to explain how racialized psyches are traumatized not simply by immediate experiences of racism, but by the historical trauma that these instances evoke. The buried trauma of colonialism is a collective melancholia that haunts the body of postcolonial subjects (Ibid). Like Munoz's reading of Julien, melancholia in Mohabeer's work is a necessary grieving that is not repressed or lamented but becomes a site of creative and productive tension.

### **Cautiously queer: A final warning regarding spectatorship and desire**

While I have offered a largely celebratory reading of Mohabeer's films, I want to avoid romanticizing the "queer diasporic person of colour". A significant body of scholarship has emerged recently that centres this subject as occupying a vantage point from which it is possible to unmask the homophobia of postcolonial nationalisms and the racism of mainstream white queer communities. However, this work and the omnipotence of this idealised subject should be critiqued. While the queer person of colour in the diaspora might occupy a position across borders and carry the ability to speak in an array of syntaxes, I would argue, however, that such a position is one of great privilege. The subject who is positioned as "knowing enough" about marginality to speak about it while also knowing enough to commodify Otherness can both implicitly and explicitly support neo-colonial agendas, as mentioned in the previous discussion concerning native informants (Ansari 2008).

The diasporic subject can and often does enact a violating gaze that constructs those "back home" as "backward", while using the slippery language of identity politics to claim a right to do so. What is Mohabeer's relationship to queers who still live in the Caribbean? How do her films offer a sense of both nostalgia and disdain for diasporic queer subjects that can negate the nuanced ways that sexualities in postcolonial contexts are expressed, and change over time? Unfortunately, constraints of time and space do not permit full exploration of these tensions, which will hopefully find a place of expression in forthcoming works.

Similarly, issues of audience reception have not been fully explored in this work and deserve more consideration in forthcoming writings. A final note of caution should be offered regarding the ways in which audiences can seize upon artistic works, particularly those that employ avant garde techniques which can easily be misinterpreted. While

Mohabeer may intend to offer aesthetically complex and politically challenging works that disrupt succinct ideas of linear time and sexuality, these intentions can be misinterpreted in a climate of racism and homophobia. For Western audiences that receive these works, Mohabeer's films might tap into latent racist and ethnocentric ideas about countries in the global south as being sexually regressive and uncivilized. The rhetoric of the "homophobic Caribbean" can easily be used to make sense of these films in ways that recirculate trite colonial metaphors regarding the untutored manners and mores of non-white, third world bodies (Ibid). Similarly, the fact that Mohabeer is a diasporic subject could cause audiences in the global south and specifically the Caribbean to view her works as "Western", thereby locating queer desire outside of the region in ways that reinforce dominant nationalist scripts of heteronormativity. However, as I have tried to demonstrate throughout this piece, while avant garde aesthetics can be misread and simplified, they offer all that good art can usually offer—possibility. Mohabeer's films offer a possible rupture from dominant scripts and the languages in which they are told.

### **Putting the 'Cool' in Coolie: What's so great about art anyway?**

Art has the potential to disrupt. It is a potential not just to disrupt the status quo by offering up another set of grand pronouncements; rather, by questioning the very terms through which truths are told, art can trouble fixed realities themselves. Mohabeer's work puts the "cool" in coolie by transcending the binaries of pathologization and celebration that often structure discourses of identity politics. Mohabeer does not celebrate a romantic Indo-Caribbean identity or community in ways that harken back to a mythical pre-colonial past or fail to note the sexism and homophobia that exist within all communities. Similarly, her work refuses an easy alignment with "gay pride" narratives that must willfully deny the ethnocentrism and racism of narratives of queer liberation. Instead, she uses the skills of cinema to question how these stories of diaspora and sexuality are told.

The "cool" in coolie is a disidentification with dominant nationalist scripts that imagine the Indo-Caribbean woman to be anything but "cool" and instead throw her into the flames of sexist, homophobic violence in the name of antiquated, colonial ideals of nation and honour. The "cool" in coolie is also a disidentification with the hype of mainstream white queer popular cultures that are more often than not decidedly Western and steeped in the logic of late capitalism (Puar 2007). In Mohabeer's work, what becomes "cool" is how art is used to articulate desires and bodies that are often inaudible and unseen.

### **Conclusion: The queering of colonialism through avant garde art practice**

Flickering images on screen are rarely understood or taken seriously as radical anti-colonial politics. Yet, in discussing how Mohabeer disidentifies with dominant discourses of heteronormative Caribbeanness and white, Western queerness, I hope to have demonstrated the value of her work and the work of other queer postcolonial artists.

Frantz Fanon ended his seminal treaty *Black Skin, White Masks* with the words, "Oh my body, make of me a man who always questions!" (Fanon 1967, 222) Years later, born

out of a markedly different time and space, through the tilted lens of a queer Guyanese woman, we are left with a series of films that do just that.

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